

Peer-review report of

Wu, D.J., Law, K.F., Syropoulos, S., & Perry, S.P. (2026). The politics of well-being during democratic backsliding: How partisan affiliation and support for government actions relate to happiness and life satisfaction. *advances.in/psychology*, 1, e569295. <https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00051>

Round 1

Editor Decision

Dear Authors,

Thank you for submitting your manuscript, “The Politics of Well-Being During Democratic Backsliding: How Partisan Affiliation and Policy Support Relate to Happiness and Life Satisfaction,” for consideration in our special issue on *The Psychology of Pushback*. We have now received feedback from two experts with significant expertise in this area. We are grateful for their constructive comments, which, in conjunction with our own independent editorial review, have informed our decision to invite a revision of your manuscript.

We all emphasize the clear strengths of your work. Reviewer 1 highlights the “strong theoretical arguments and related hypotheses,” your “pre-registered study with longitudinal design” conducted during an important timeframe, and your rigorous analyses. Similarly, Reviewer 2 states that the study “offers interesting insights into partisan policy” and describes your research design as “commendable.” We fully concur with this evaluation. Moreover, the paper is very well written. While recognizing these strengths, both reviewers also identify several areas for improvement. As their comments are outlined clearly in the appended reviews, we will not repeat them all here. Instead, we ask you to address each of their concerns or provide an explanation of why you have handled it in a different way in your revision. In the following, we will highlight the points that we see as most central to strengthening the manuscript.

One reviewer suggests using a different term than “longitudinal” to describe the study, recommending instead a focus on its occurrence during an extraordinary period. While we agree that “longitudinal” is an important and accurate descriptor, we believe you could strengthen the framing by highlighting that it was an intensive longitudinal study conducted during a unique and critical timeframe, or similar phrasing.

A reviewer requests clarification regarding participant retention, and we concur that this is a critical point. While your use of Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML) is indeed beneficial for statistical power, this method rests on the assumption that data are missing at random (MAR). It is essential that you present a formal test for selective attrition, specifically examining whether participant dropout is related to

your key variables of political satisfaction and well-being. This analysis is also crucial for ruling out potential confounders that could explain your unexpected finding of increased well-being among Democrats.

One issue that occurred to us in our independent reading involves the hypotheses. You concisely summarize the hypotheses at the end of the introduction. However, given some of the nuanced and unexpected findings, we recommend presenting a more detailed set of predictions that (a) briefly reminds readers of the rationale behind each, (b) more directly maps onto your analytic tests, and (c) specifies the precise measures involved. Essentially, we would like you to set up a "scorecard" that provides a clear lens for readers to anticipate and evaluate the support for your predictions.

Your analysis could be improved in several ways. First, regarding Figure 1, which provides an excellent visualization, the slope for Democrats appears potentially quadratic. We ask that you test this possibility by adding a quadratic slope to your growth models in addition to the linear slope, and ensure that you present fit indices for all models conducted. Relatedly, both reviewers ask for clarification and further information regarding the regression models. Specifically, one reviewer requests more information on significant predictors (among the covariates), while the other asks for a clearer consideration of the implications of controlling for participants' political affiliation. The reviewer notes that this has consequences regarding the generalizability of the findings, as your sample explicitly comprises Republicans and Democrats. Please also report whether multicollinearity between political affiliation and political satisfaction was a concern. Furthermore, in your discussion, it is critical to devote more attention to the finding that support for actions taken against the administration, in particular, lost statistical significance over time.

In line with one of the reviewers, we believe that additional analyses focusing on the ethnic majority versus minority status of participants would be a valuable addition. You could approach this by presenting exploratory tests, including a graph illustrating the well-being trajectories for these different groups. Analytically, you could either add ethnicity as another clustering variable at level 2 or run the growth model with this new variable as the sole predictor. To be clear, we are not asking you to replace the analyses already present, but rather to add a dedicated exploratory analysis section.

An open question that your paper discusses but does not analytically consider is whether you can observe longitudinal effects between political satisfaction and well-being. We agree that the changing nature of the political questions makes it difficult to justify a RI-CLPM or a growth curve model that includes it. However, a fixed-effects regression model may offer an acceptable method for analyzing the longitudinal data. This approach would build upon your current correlational findings by better isolating the unique relationship between within-person changes in policy support and within-person changes in well-being. By focusing exclusively on within-person change, the model would specifically test whether an individual's deviation from their own average level of policy support in a given week is associated with a concurrent deviation from their own average well-being. Of course, implementing this

model requires making and testing a key assumption, given that the items measuring policy support changed each week. The model assumes that a composite score of policy support, created by averaging responses to the pro(anti)-administration policies at each wave, is a reliable and comparable measure of the same underlying construct across time. In other words, you must assume that the composite score for week two is functionally equivalent to the composite score for week three, even though they are derived from different policy questions. This assumption could be partially tested by examining the internal consistency of the composite score at each timepoint (for which some items will need to be reverse-scored) and the test-retest reliability of the scale. Adopting this analytical strategy, while carefully acknowledging its underlying assumption, would provide an interesting exploratory test of the hypothesis that shifts in political satisfaction have a longitudinal effect on well-being.

As you rework your analytical strategy, please also note Reviewer 2's comment about this statement in the current version of your manuscript (lines 102-105): "Finally, we tested whether policy support — with Republicans generally favoring administration actions and Democrats favoring oppositional actions — predicted well-being, and whether these associations held after accounting for political affiliation and demographics." While you have been treating political affiliation as predictor in most parts of the study, this sentence makes it sound like a covariate, which deviates from the general narrative. Reviewer 2 comments, "If political affiliation is held constant, this excludes directional findings of Republicans and Democrats. This means the analysis tests whether policy support predicts well-being irrespective of political affiliation." We suspect that political affiliation is still being treated conceptually as a predictor rather than as a covariate in your analysis. Indeed, it is interesting to distinguish political satisfaction from group-based political affiliation. If that is the case, please make that clearer to readers, who might get distracted by the current wording and report correlations and regression coefficients for both variables.

We appreciate that you presented a sensitivity power analysis, but please provide a similar analysis or another type of sample size justification for the growth models as well.

You also need to discuss the limitations inherent in using single-item measures.

We ask that you expand your discussion to consider the broader social implications of your findings for democratic backsliding. For instance, does the rebound of well-being have consequences for system stability? Furthermore, please discuss the extent to which your findings are generalizable to other contexts. We believe that, with caveats, they can be informative for many societies experiencing authoritarian shifts, but they may also be limited by their focus on the US and a very particular point in time (see related comments by one of the reviewer).

MINOR POINTS

We also have several minor points for your consideration.

Please provide 95% CIs instead of *SEs* for all effects from your models; for Table 4 specifically, these should be in brackets.

We ask that you move the descriptions of deviations from the pre-registration from the footnote into the main text.

When you describe correlations as “strong,” it would be helpful if you referred to more recent thresholds that you likely relied on (e.g., <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2752>) instead of the classic Cohen’s recommendations to avoid confusion.

Please also carefully review the manuscript to avoid the use of causal wording when describing correlations (e.g., “shaped”).

Per APA 7th edition style, please italicize scale endpoints.

Please include all figures as SVG files in your revised submission.

Finally, our automated citation report indicated some potential inconsistencies. We ask that you review the report and address any valid issues, keeping in mind that the report may also contain some false positives. You can access the report here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ilqOPmXy6b9K4yUNsQahin7OZuS3mci-/view?usp=sharing>

In summary, we believe this manuscript holds considerable promise, though its potential is not yet fully realized in its current form. We therefore invite you to submit a revised version that addresses the points outlined above. Recognizing that these revisions will require additional space, we are granting a 1,500-word extension to the manuscript’s word count. Please submit your revision by November 15. Your submission should include a detailed cover letter that describes, point-by-point, how and where you have addressed our concerns and those raised by the reviewers. Should you require additional time, please do not hesitate to contact us. We look forward to receiving your revised work.

Best,

Jonas R. Kunst & John F. Dovidio

Reviewer 1

Overall summary:

-Thank you for the opportunity to review this manuscript. This longitudinal study covers the important topics of democratic backsliding and personal well-being (WB) in a US convenience sample, operationalized via partisan affiliation, policy support, happiness, and life satisfaction. During the study period (5 weeks), Democrats (v. Republicans) reported lower satisfaction. Although, contrary to hypotheses, both groups showed modest increases in WB over the study period, additional hypotheses were generally supported (i.e., policy support was associated WB in the expected directions, even when controlling for political affiliation and socio-demographics). However, these relations did not always hold in regression models, and I look forward to seeing future work in this area.

Strengths

-strong theoretical arguments and related hypotheses based on historical and relatively recent work in this area (e.g., showing increasing political hostility and impact on everyday life, including personal WB); solid introduction and theoretical reasoning overall

-pre-registered study with longitudinal design, and important and clear time frame of study (and clear discussion of specific socio-political events in the US during this time) with adequate statistical power

-analyses seem appropriate, though I would like to see a bit more context for what was significant / driving the 4 regression models not supported (below)

-clear and useful variables employed, including relevant current events; some questions about the WB variables (below) and how much we can trust / interpret the modest change on these over-time, but I understand these are somewhat widely used in such survey work

-good use of common demographics and inclusion in models overall

-very solid discussion and presentation of data for reader

Limitations:

-did not see a mention of ethics approval / IRB

-can more be said about #8 in pre-registration re: prior data collection?

-would like to see more operationalization of WB, happiness, and life satisfaction in prior work (e.g., Fraser et al., 2022, line 56), so that readers can better understand prior measurement of these related variables and contextualize the current study even better

-related, can the first para of Politics and Well-Being be clarified a bit? i.e., how do we interpret the findings of higher political interest —> lower well-being? Have these studies controlled for socio-demographics and potential selection effects or other variables? Etc. A bit more info on this would further help situate the current study's control variables and findings

-I see a relatively high retention rate across waves and use of “all available data” stated here and in OSF. Were there any attention checks used, or participants removed for any reason? I am assuming not. Can you say more about this decision and validity of your data?

-what is the test-retest reliability / current field support for the life satisfaction and happiness measures?

-for table 4, I am curious if any of the control variables were particularly strong independent predictors or correlates of policy support or WB? I would be interested in a bit of commentary on what might be explaining the weakened relation, especially for the satisfaction with the 4 policies no longer supported. What do we think is driving this? It is particularly notable at T4 and T5 in this table. Overall, thanks for displaying these findings so clearly so that we can see this pattern easily

-I also appreciate the detailed Discussion and look forward to future work looking at empirical support for these theories in our current political climate, as well as related work on resilience, political measurement (including RWA and related constructs), and marginalized groups. To this end, and my question above, I do wonder if marginalized group identities (e.g., race, SES) may have moderated some of the findings in those regression models

-I believe there might be room for other factors to study too going forward (not exhaustive – but participants’ employment status and worries about it, anticipated financial impacts, trust in the supreme court and related institutions, news/social media consumption, etc.)

Reviewer 2

The Politics of Well-Being During Democratic Backsliding

This paper presents an interesting exploration of well-being, particularly in the context of high level of polarization and volatility in the United States. It investigates happiness and life satisfaction, under the umbrella of well-being, during the early months of Trump’s second term. It offers interesting insights into partisans policy approval through analyses of “news articles” about policies/actions from February and March of 2025. The research design is commendable, featuring a well-structured open framework. The findings suggest that well-being increases among supporters of government policies, and that Conservatives report higher levels of life satisfaction compared to Democrats. However, I believe the study requires substantial review and theoretical clarification to adequately present its novel contribution to the literature.

Below, I provide detailed comments:

Clarity:

- (lines: 103-105): If political affiliation is held constant, this excludes directional findings of Republicans and Democrats. This means the analysis tests whether policy support predicts well-being irrespective of political affiliation. Since the sample comprises only those identifying as Democrats or Republicans (line 201-202), this limits the generalizing to a non-partisan population. The data later also shows that even those who identify as independent, are further placed in partisan group.
- The time frame examined (February-March 2025) is fairly short, which restricts the claims for time variation.

Theoretical concept:

- Both **system justification theory** and **motivated cognition** are inherently stable and not time dependent. For example, **system justification theory** states that individuals are “*psychologically motivated to defend, justify, and rationalize social and political systems, even when those systems disadvantage them*” (line 111-113) – this implies stability over time, as regardless of who is in power or the level of polarization, Conservatives would consistently favor system justification while Democrats would oppose it. Similarly, **motivated cognition** implies a rigidity in ideological processing of political information. This also means that motivated cognition varies less due to contextual factors, such as Trump or increased polarization is less of a factor. However, the third theoretical approach allows for time-dependent variations, where higher polarization could affect individual alignment with political values, especially around Trump’s highly polarizing policies. I

would suggest the authors either provide more details on the time variability component for System Justification or Motivated Cognition theories, or prioritize theoretical framework focused on the Person (i.e., egocentric) environmental fit in the study. This also would relax limitation 1 in the limitations and future direction section.

- The language surrounding policy and political partisanship should be consistent and carefully framed throughout the manuscript. For example, lines 163-164 states that this study examines whether “*political partisanship predicts well-being...*” – when political partisanship should be outcome of emotional well-being, or there should be acknowledgement of potential endogeneity issue (directional problem of what comes first). The focus of this research is on policy (line 165), which can lead to feeling of happiness or not (i.e., where well-being is an outcome). Also, see phrasing in line 159-160.

- The authors should really reconsider whether their study focuses on temporal changes or specific circumstances. As outlined in lines 169-177, the analysis pertains to a particularly highly volatile period, with data collection on just one month (end of February to end of March 2025), which covers an unprecedented time in US politics. Therefore, it may be more accurate to frame this study as focused on an outlier period rather than a longitudinal analysis. Focusing on such extraordinary times could enhance the significance, I think it might be even more important.

Research questions:

- The first two research questions seem inadequate and indicate limitations that warrant further investigation. For example, the first question: “*are Democrats more unhappy and dissatisfied, as well as less supportive of the current administration’s policies, compared to Republicans?*” – since Republicans are in power, this is quite expected and the dynamic has been widely investigated in the literature. E.g., satisfaction with government is higher in partisans supporting ruling parties, as compared to those who support opposition. The second research question, “*does well-being changes over time during this period of rapid political upheaval?*” – would benefit from a longer time frame that includes comparative baseline to establish whether the slope of change is different during this period compared to stable times.

Data

- The data collection and reporting efforts are commendable and should be acknowledged.
- Some of the news items reported do not qualify as governmental policies. For example, T5, option 2, Chief Justice Roberts rebuking Trump for calling impeachment of a federal judge or 3 a federal judge's order blocking DOGE from accessing Social Security information. A federal judge order to rehire thousands of fired government workers. Similarly, other examples such as views toward Ukraine and proposal to acquire and develop the Gaza strip. These are not government policies as is implied and concerns other branch of the political system. This also connects to the lack of clarity in terminology as policy and government actions are used interchangeably – although meaning differs. Finally, options b, are not government actions.

Results:

- It remains unclear how control for political party in the linear regression model provides us with general information. At what level is the variable kept constant, especially considering that all participants identify as either Conservative or Democrats? This partisan sample by default complicates general claims and its applicability to the larger population.
- There is labeling confusion throughout the manuscript as the focus is on political actions rather than actual policy support. Policies typically imply change in policy outcomes, while this research is based on more news related outcomes.
- In Table 4, the authors should provide full details regarding covariates and model specifications (R square, N). This information could also be provided in appendix.

Discussion:

- The slope increase in reported well-being among Democrats is fairly minor to suggest “*resilience processes such as adaptation or solidarity*” (i.e., line 368). This could be indicative of omitted variable bias behind the significance.
- Also, line 369 states: “policy support predicts well-being above and beyond partisan identity” – as previously mentioned partisan identity could arguably be an outcome of well-being, potentially forming the initial link in the causal chain, i.e., satisfaction with government performance leads to partisanship.
- The novelty of the evidence presented in lines 371-372 could be emphasized more effectively by situating it within the context of the volatile period under investigation in US democracy as compared to general contribution to the field.

- Also, the mean value of support for Trum's policies $M=4.27$ (line 400) is interesting on its own, as it is only slightly above what presumably is neutral (neither support nor against). This observation highlights the need for the inclusion of a detailed table in the appendix that would have full variable description. While some information is available within the manuscript additional information can be provided in the appendix.

Limitation and Future directions

- The pre-registration aspect of this paper is indeed a strength, as well as the authors' openness regarding data and coding.
- The limitation section is well structured, however, the third limitation deserves mention in the main text, as it bears important implications for research question three and warrants justification for its feasibility.

Conclusion

- The conclusion tends to be repetitive, with many points already articulated in the limitation and future research section. Reducing redundancy would enhance the overall impact of the paper.

Minor points:

- The statement "*less is known whether one's political affiliation predicts well-being over time*" (line 86-87) contradicts: "*Across timepoints greater conservatism consistently predicts higher well-being*" (line 94-95).

Round 2

Editor Decision

Dear Authors,

Thank you for submitting your revised manuscript, "The Politics of Well-Being During Democratic Backsliding: How Partisan Affiliation and Policy Support Relate to Happiness and Life Satisfaction," for consideration in our special issue on *The Psychology of Pushback*. We have received feedback from the same two experts who evaluated your initial submission, and we also reviewed the paper ourselves another time.

We all agree that your paper has improved a lot due to your diligent revisions, and we believe that only minor additional revisions are needed before this paper can be

published as part of the special issue. In addition to the very minor points outlined by the reviewers, please attend to the following:

1. Thank you for running the Monte Carlo simulations for the growth model. Please summarize the results briefly in text so readers can assess the power – you seem to indicate the corresponding power for the different paths in the results section, which is helpful, but it would be good to also briefly summarize the power indication in the methods section.
2. When describing associations between wellbeing and political support, please avoid terms that could be interpreted as causal (e.g., “predicted”) throughout (including in the abstract). Please also discuss the possible reversed causality for this association.
3. Please break this sentence into two: “Thus, we recognize that this limits the generalizability of our findings, given that an increasing proportion of Americans identify as Independents (Jones, 2024), future research should examine whether Independents experience well-being patterns more similar to those of the dominant group, the opposition group, or somewhere in between.”
4. To ensure coherence between SI papers, we ask authors to draw connections between them. For instance, this paper (<https://advances.in/psychology/10.56296/aip00042/>) may hint at processes (future anxiety) that could be tested in future research. These two papers (<https://doi.org/10.56296/aip00048>, in press, attached), <https://advances.in/psychology/10.56296/aip00040/> show similar rebound effects (although on different measures), which could help contextualize the findings in your paper.
5. There are still issues with your references and citations. These include misspelled author names, missing references that are cited in text, mismatches between citations and references (due to abbreviations in citations), and references in the reference list which are not cited in the text. Please use our free tool at <https://apa.advances.in> to check your manuscript, make changes, and validate these by uploading your document in the app again until the issues are resolved. Also, please use the DOI lookup function in the app to validate and check for missing DOIs.

In conclusion, we believe this manuscript is very close to being accepted in our special issue and we look forward to receiving the likely final version. Given the minor extent of the requested revisions, we ask you to submit the revised version by January 10.

We wish you happy holidays if you celebrate and a good start in a productive new year.

Best,

Jonas R. Kunst & John F. Dovidio

Reviewer 1

Overall summary:

-Thank you for the opportunity to review this revised manuscript. I believe the authors were quite responsive to the reviewers and have produced an even stronger manuscript.

Strengths

-a key strength continues to be the strong theoretical arguments and related hypotheses. I believe the new framing in the intro also fits well re: the methodology of the study, i.e., “intensive longitudinal study during a unique and critical timeframe”

-the new supplemental table re: retention is helpful, thank you; similarly, the detailed predictors on lines 165-191 is much easier for readers to follow

-table 4 with all covariate effects is helpful to see now, as well as the supplemental findings on race, thank you – this helps contextualize the work a bit more

-I also appreciate the detailed reply re: interactions effects and marginalized identities, as well as discussion of individual differences on lines 534-539

Limitations:

-minor: I do think the language could be clearer re: lines 82-84, as this sounds similar to the original sentence still

-thank you for the clarification on data quality; if not in OSF, I do believe this could be mentioned in one sentence in your method (e.g., Qualtrics data checks used, no bots found or unusually fast responding).

Reviewer 2

The authors have fully addressed my concerns from the previous version, and the revised manuscript is substantially improved.